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RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 3098
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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 003196

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/06/2017
TAGS: [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [BL](#)
SUBJECT: EVO'S RECALL PLOY MASKS TRUE INTENTIONS

Classified By: ADCM Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: International and domestic press have greeted President Evo Morales' call for a recall referendum for himself and Bolivia's nine prefects (state governors) as an important conciliatory step. Meanwhile, significantly less attention is being paid to the decision to reconvene the Constituent Assembly in Evo's cocalero stronghold. It is unclear whether Evo's call for a referendum will produce concrete results; it seems considerably more certain that the MAS will approve a new constitution next week. End summary.

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Referendum Shell Game
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12. (C) On December 5, President Evo Morales publicly challenged Bolivia's prefects (state governors) to submit to a recall referendum; Evo said he would also put himself at the mercy of the will of the people. This is not the first time Evo has called for a referendum on his rule and that of other leaders: in January of 2007 he sent to Congress a law that would have prompted a referendum on the presidency, the prefects, and mayors--that law still has not been reviewed by Congress. The public call for a referendum, which has made international press and currently dominates the domestic media, may be designed to distract attention from the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) decision to reconvene the Constituent Assembly in the Chapare, a MAS stronghold and center of the Evo's militant cocalero base.

13. (C) In his challenge to the prefects, Evo phrased the proposed referendum in terms of determining the broad goals and wishes of the electorate: "...let the people say if they are with change or not with change; let the people say if they are with the neoliberal model, with privatization, with the auction of our natural resources, of our companies, or not." The law convoking a referendum has not yet been submitted to Congress, and the potential voting rules are therefore unknown, but under almost any set of rules, the

outcome is almost certain: no change, either in the presidency or the prefectures. Evo's popularity (and the lack of a viable alternative to his rule) suggest that he would win a referendum, and the various prefects are generally equally as secure in their own prefectures. The referendum, were it to occur, would therefore be an almost meaningless exercise, although Evo would doubtless use any confirmation of his presidency as a propaganda tool. Emboff spoke with opposition Santa Cruz civic committee members, who are withholding judgment until details are available and in the meantime plan to continue with their current civil disobedience. (Note: Podemos Senator Oscar Ortiz reportedly told the press on December 6 that his party would participate in a recall referendum. End Note).

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Chapare: A "Safe" Place for the Constitution
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¶4. (C) Opposition leaders are saying that a referendum does not make sense, while the head of the centrist National Unity party called Evo's proposal a "smoke bomb." Behind the smoke screen is the MAS decision to reconvene the Constituent Assembly on December 12 in the Chapare, the center of Evo's coca-growing syndicalist power base. The decision to move the Assembly was taken by Assembly President Silvia Lazarte, using the power recently granted to her by MAS Congress members in the absence of the opposition.

¶5. (C) Isaac Avalos, president of the MAS-aligned campesino group CSUTCB has stated that they will guarantee "normal functioning" of the Assembly and added that the cocaleros are organizing to support the Assembly as well. These reassurances ring hollow to the opposition, as MAS social groups recently physically blocked opposition senators from entering Congress. Podemos assembly-member Ruben Dario Cuellar described the decision as evidence that "the MAS is not capable of democratic dialogue on their (constitutional) text and needs to use coercion." On December 5, Cuellar told Emboff that the opposition, at least his party (the largest, representing over half the opposition), would never attend the Assembly in the Chapare because there is no way to ensure his assembly-members' safety.

¶6. (C) Beyond the fact that the Chapare is a diehard MAS stronghold where the opposition would be subjected to overt threats, the Chapare poses a series of logistical obstacles that would limit opposition participation. It is only accessible via a two hour drive from Cochabamba city or via a military airport in Chimore (the center of the USG's anti-narcotics efforts). While the government is likely to facilitate MAS delegates' access to Chimore airport, it almost certainly would block this option for the opposition. Roads and critical access points will probably be blocked by pro-MAS groups. Furthermore, there are few hotels to lodge the 255 Constituent Assembly delegates. MAS-sympathetic cocaleros/protesters will undoubtedly provide lodging to MAS delegates, but the over one hundred opposition delegates again would be left to fend for themselves.

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Comment
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¶7. (C) Our consular agent in Cochabamba informed us that nearly fifteen thousand cocaleros are currently marching in Cochabamba. This show of force (echoing a January march in which cocaleros threatened prefect Manfred Reyes Villa and burned the prefecture) sheds light on the MAS decision to hold the Assembly in the Chapare: implicit intimidation of the opposition could be made explicit very easily. The decision to reconvene in the Chapare, where protesters will likely be MAS-aligned, highlights the paper-thinness of Evo's veneer of democratic legitimacy. In a meeting with the Charge on December 5, Vice Foreign Minister Hugo Fernandez discussed new constitution that, in Evo's words, will be pushed through "no matter what the cost." By Fernandez's admission, the constitution that results from recent MAS

machinations will be "legal but not legitimate." The question of the constitution's legality also seems in doubt, but there is no judicial entity to pass judgment since the MAS has eviscerated the Constitutional Tribunal. Evo has once again demonstrated his ability to outmaneuver the opposition. By calling a referendum, Evo presents himself as a democrat while obscuring his determined drive to stay in power by pushing forward with a constitution that allows indefinite reelection. End Comment.

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